Stonewall: A Complicated History

presented by Hayley Brooks
with the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests
Social Change Theory: Adam Curle

Four stages of social change: education, confrontation, negotiation, transformation/change and sustainable peace.

Keep this model in mind as we think about Stonewall and the complexity of its history.
Discussion: What do you already know about Stonewall?

➔ In groups of 3-4 people, write a list of everything you know about Stonewall.
  • Including: people, places, dates, organizations, social climate, events, etc.
  • What was significant about Stonewall?
Historical Context

- In 1950, Harry Hay founded the Mattachine Society.
  - Part of the Homophile Movement
- In 1955, The Daughters of Bilitis was founded in San Francisco as an alternative to lesbian bars.
  - The New York chapter was created in 1958 by Barbara Gittings
- Janus Society in Philadelphia
- Society for Individual Rights in San Francisco

- In 1966, in San Francisco’s Tenderloin District, after the older gay manager died at Compton’s Cafeteria, new management hired Pinkerton security guards to harass the gay and transgender youth who spent time there. Vanguard, a newly formed activist group picketed the restaurant and about a month later, after a policeman grabbed the arm of a crossdresser, the gay and transgender youth began to fight back against the police.
Historical Context

➔ 1968– North American Conference of Homophile Organization in Chicago
  • Homosexual Bill of Rights
  • Frank Kameny’s slogan “Gay is Good”
➔ Annual Reminder– July 4 in Philadelphia
  • Precursor to Pride Parade/Christopher Street Liberation Day

➔ The Stonewall Inn was located in Greenwich Village, a gay ghetto in New York.
➔ “The most important part about the clientele at the Stonewall Inn is that all segments of the gay and lesbian community, including strong representation of the more marginal elements, defined the Stonewall Inn as a special place in the homosexual world of greater New York” (Carter 77).
The Stonewall Inn, like many gay bars at the time, was owned by the Mafia. The Mafia and Ed Murphy were involved in blackmailing gay men, as well as creating prostitution rings. The Mafia recruited youth for these organized crimes from the Stonewall. The Mafia paid off the police in order to keep the bars open.

- “Even with police payoffs, illegal bars were raided on an average of once a month but more frequently during an election campaign” (Carter 82).
- “There was such close cooperations between the police and the gay bars that the police would time the raids to minimize the disruption to the bars’ business” (Carter 83).

In June 1969, five gay bars were raided over the course of three weeks and several bars were closed for good.

“‘There was that collusion between the cops and the mob, and were like caught in the middle all the time’” (Carter 78, quoting Craig Rodwell).
“Stonewall was less a turning point than a final stimulus in a series of public altercations.”

Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*
Discussion: What institutions affected Stonewall?

➔ In groups of 3–4 people, brainstorm a list of institutions and institutional practices that affected the Stonewall Riots.

- Place particular attention to: public policy, police/law enforcement, organized crime, economy/capitalism and the media
- “The Stonewall Inn both as a social institution and as a geographic site had a number of unique or special features that, taken together, explain why the riots erupted there” (Carter 256).
What happened during the riots? (the very very abridged version)

➔ Deputy Inspector Seymour Pine planned to shut down the bar. He led the two raids of the bar with a search warrant because the bar was operating without a liquor license.
➔ The police force lined up the drag queens and trans women in a separate room. They checked IDs and forced people out of the bar. A few people (a group of lesbians namely) resisted this.
➔ Crowd gathered outside on the street (where they normally would have just left).
➔ First patron was a drag queen, hit police over the head with a purse and/or shoe (different sources say this was Marsha P. Johnson or Maria Ritter--both young trans women of color at the time)
➔ Second patron was a lesbian who resisted arrest (escaped the police car twice)
➔ Police barricaded themselves inside the bar
➔ Group of people dislodged a parking meter, used it to break down the door
➔ Raids occurred regularly, but this was the first sustained resistance
➔ Bar opened again the next day, police raided it again with the hopes of closing it down and patrons of the bar resisted again
“The question of who gets credit for starting the riots is one that deserves consideration. That question, however, contains a premise: that an individual or group of individuals can be singled out as the prime mover in a complex process that many persons collectively created” (261).

David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*
The Image of Stonewall

➔ In different groups, discuss the ways the trailer portrays Stonewall. How is the story told? Whose story is being told? Who is at the center?
“That at least three of these street kids were literally on the front line of this action is documented by a photograph taken that night by freelance photographer Joseph Ambrosini” (Carter 162).

“What I know definitely from my own experience is that the people who did the most fighting were the drag queens and hustlers. [They] fought with the same ferocity they would fight with when any situation of survival put their sense of dignity on the line, very much like Bob Dylan’s ‘When you ain’t got nothing, you got nothing to lose’” (Carter 162, quoting Tommy Lanigan-Schmidt).
“‘Sweet! Bullshit! There’s that stereotype homosexual again, man! Soft, weak, sensitive! Bullshit! That’s the role society has been forcing these queens to play, and they just sit and accept it. We have got to radicalize, man! Be proud of who you are, man! And if takes riots or even guns to show them what we are, well, that’s the only language that the pigs understand...All the oppressed have got to unite! The system keeps us all week by keeping us separate’” (Carter 216, quoting James Fouratt).
“The first hostile act outside the club occurred when a police officer shoved one of the transvestites, who turned and smacked the officer over the head with her purse. The cop clubbed her, and a wave of anger pass through the crowd, which immediately showered the police with boos and catcalls, followed by a cry to turn the paddy wagon over” (Carter 148).
“The next bar patron to be taken from the Stonewall was a lesbian, and she was decidedly not in a good mood. The existence of this lesbian and her supposed role in the Stonewall Riots have always been among the most controversial aspects of the riots, with some prominent commentators displaying skepticism about her” (Carter 150).

“There is no doubt that, furios for whatever reason, she put up a fight...She fought them all the way from the Stonewall Inn’s entrance to the back door of a waiting police car...As the heroic fight by the lesbian who had twice escaped neared its end, the crowd erupted” (Carter 151).
“The riots took place not just in the world’s media capital but on a block with two significant media sites: *The Village Voice*, the country’s leading alternative newspaper at the time, was only about fifty feet away, and the Lion’s Den, the Village’s main social center for journalists, was even closer. That, all of the reporters who covered the riots, Howard Smith, Lucian Truscott, and the unknown *Rat* reporter— the three who wrote the most detailed accounts of the riots’ outbreak—simply stumbled across the event is a striking coincidence” (Carter 258).
“I think it is clear that special credit must be given to gay homeless youths, to transgendered men [sic], and to the lesbian who fought the police. Among these, we can name three individuals known to have been in the vanguard: Jackie Hormona, Marsha Johnson and Zazu Nova” (Carter 261).
The Legacy of Stonewall

In November 1969, at the Eastern Regional Conference of Homophile Organizations (ERCHO), Craig Rodwell suggested that the Annual Reminder be moved to New York and renamed as Christopher Street Liberation Day. The resolution passed with support of all organizations except Mattachine-NY, which abstained.
The Legacy of Stonewall

Gay Liberation Front (GLF) formed immediately after the riots, “‘We formed after the recent pig bust of the Stonewall, a well known gay bar in Greenwich Village. We’ve come to realize that all our frustrations and feelings of oppression are real...We identify ourselves with all the oppressed: the Vietnamese struggle, the third world, the blacks, the workers...all those oppressed by this rotten, dirty, vile, fucked-up capitalist conspiracy’” (Carter 220, quoting GLF article)
“But of all the contentious issues that wracked this most contentious organization (which claimed not to be an organization at all but a loose collection of individuals and small groups of individuals), the most divisive of all was the issue that had bedeviled it from its first meeting, whether it should be a one-issue organization or whether it should ally itself with all other progressive causes” (Carter 232).
The Legacy of Stonewall

GLF only remained active for four months. Following this, the Gay Activist Alliance formed, as well as the Street Transvestite Action Revolution.

“Transgender activists Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson had left GLF to help form GAA, but ultimately found themselves, and issues of gender identity, excluded. In 1970 they started Street Transvestite Action Revolution (STAR), which became the foundational group for contemporary transgender activism” (Bronski 211).
The Legacy of Stonewall

“GAA’s single-issue politics had a much greater impact than GLF on mainstream gay political organizing. It became the template for the contemporary gay rights movements, which works to change, not overthrow the system” (Bronski 212).

“The Lavender Menace, who now called themselves Radicalesbians and understood that their concerns were distinct from those of heterosexual women and gay men, began a distinct movement: lesbian feminism” (Bronski 213).
Discussion: The Legacy of Stonewall

In small groups, discuss the following questions:

➔ What language is used to describe Stonewall and how does that affect our understanding of it? (Come up with a list of terms that have been used to describe Stonewall [i.e. rebellion, riots, etc.])

➔ What do you think caused the split and eventual demise of GLF?

➔ What impact did this being a violent event make on LGBT politics then and now?
Resources/Further Research

Books

Primary Sources

Documentaries
*Stonewall Uprising*. Dir. Kate Davis and David Heilbroner. PBS American Experience, 2010. Film.
Resources/ Further Research

YouTube Videos

*How We Got Gay* (full documentary)
*Pay It No Mind: The Life and Times of Marsha P. Johnson* (full documentary)
*Did Hollywood Whitewash Stonewall?*
*Stonewall: Out of the Closets and Into the Street*
*Stonewall + Hollywood’s Erasure*
*Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton’s Cafeteria* (full documentary)